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### Remarks concerning the Methodology and Symbolism of Bon Pebble Divination

*Remarques concernant la méthodologie et le symbolisme de la divination Bon  
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# Remarks concerning the Methodology and Symbolism of Bon Pebble Divination

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Alexander K. Smith

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- 1 To my knowledge the American anthropologist Victor Turner (1975) was the first to argue that the symbolism used in divination is markedly different from other forms of ritual discourse. With regard to the field of Tibetan Studies and its growing interest in representations of Bon culture, a conceptualization of the exegetic value of divinatory symbolism is of immense importance. Despite the number of excellent studies on the subject of Tibetan divination practices (Thomas 1957, Macdonald 1971, Ramble 1993, 2008, Walter 1995, Yao 1997, Mortensen 2006, Dotson 2007, to name just a few), it is quite difficult to find a dedicated analysis of the symbolic complexes evoked in the performance of divination. With an eye towards this new and interesting field, the present paper will address a form of pebble divination known as "manifestation of knowledge" (*lde'u 'phrul* [pronounced de'u trül]) as it is performed in the contemporary Bon community surrounding sMan ri monastery near Solan, Sirmour District (H.P), India.
- 2 The paper will be divided into three sections. First, it will provide a brief ethnographic account of sMan ri monastery and the nearby village, Dolanji. Second, the paper will address the performance of *lde'u 'phrul* divination. This analysis will focus upon the divination's required implements, invocations, and the method of casting. Third, the paper will present a discussion of the divination's symbolism. It will be shown that *lde'u 'phrul* employs a wide range of culturally specific metaphors and symbols in the production of its prognostications. Drawing from a pair of *lde'u 'phrul* manuals, the paper will attempt to explicate these symbolic configurations and chart their relationship to well known astrological schemas, such as the 'nine numerological squares' (*sme ba*) and the trigrams (*spar kha*). Before beginning, however, it is necessary to stress the limited

scope of this study, which will only address *lde'u 'phrul* performances as observed within a single monastic environment. As such, the paper will avoid any broad sweeping characterizations of pan-Himalayan pebble divination. These would be misleading in that there have been no other scholarly studies on the subject at hand.<sup>1</sup> I shall now make a few ethnographic remarks concerning sMan ri monastery so as to put the following study in context.

- 3 The fieldwork for this paper was conducted at sMan ri monastery over a four month period during the summer and the autumn of 2009. The monastery is roughly fifteen kilometers west of Solan, south of Shimla in the Shiwalik Hills of the lower Himalayas. sMan ri, founded in 1969, is the largest contemporary Bon monastery and is also the seat of H.H. sMan ri khri 'dzin Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma, the head of the Bon religion. To the eye, the monastery is a rather large monastic complex of fifteen or sixteen buildings sprawling across the top of a mountain, overlooking the Bon po settlement of Dolanji.<sup>2</sup> The monastery provides for one hundred and fifty adult monks and nearly two hundred orphan boys who are in the process of monastic training (Yungdrung Konchok 2008, p. 11). sMan ri also provides facilities for roughly fifty nuns who are housed across the valley. Taking the monastic institution into consideration, I would estimate the population of the area to be, at any particular zenith (during the Tibetan New Year, for example), between seven hundred and eight hundred and, at its lowest points, between four hundred and five hundred children and adults.<sup>3</sup>

Image 1. sMan ri Monastery as viewed from the valley



Photography by Alexander K. Smith, September 2009

- 4 There are a number of forms of divination practiced in the broader community surrounding sMan ri. The foremost among these are dice divination (*sho mo*) and rosary divination (*'phreng mo*), which are performed either by a specialist or requested from any

monk versed in the practice. By and large, however, the most sought after form of divination is a variant of pebble divination referred to as *lde'u 'phrul*, of which the foremost specialist in the community is the monastery's head educator, the sMan ri Slob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps of note that the majority of the Slob dpon's clients are from the local community. However, with the introduction of mobile phones and the recent availability of internet at the monastery, the Slob dpon is receiving a steadily increasing volume of international requests for the performance of divinations. Beyond this, divinations are also requested by members of the monastic community on behalf of their families. As such, the Slob dpon administers to patrons from a number of different countries and different socio-economic backgrounds.

## *lde'u 'phrul* Background and Performance

- 5 The divination practiced by the sMan ri Slob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma is called "manifestation of knowledge" (*lde'u 'phrul*). It is important to note, however, that the practice also goes by a number of different names. First of all, the divination possesses the phonetically similar spelling of *rde'u 'phrul* (magic pebbles). Secondly, it is not uncommon to hear the divination called "six stones" (*rdel drug*),<sup>5</sup> though the appearance of this moniker in writing is quite infrequent and carries a very specific connotation.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, it is commonplace among educated monks to hear the practice referred to as "the pebble divination of the Ma sang" (*ma sang rdel mo*).<sup>7</sup> This title is a likely reference to one of two things: (1) a mythic location where sTon pa gShen rab, the founder of the Bon religion, is said to have conducted teachings on divination;<sup>8</sup> (2) a class of semi-divine beings popular in Bon po mythology.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the rite is occasionally rendered as "the divination of sMra seng" (*sMra seng rdel mo*). The term *sMra seng* is likely a foreshortening of the epithet "lion of speech" (*sMra ba'i seng ge*), which serves *inter alia* as an appellation for the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, as well as for an emanation of sTon pa gShen rab as a codifier of the first four vehicles of the Bon religion. In any case, for the sake of simplicity and as each of these terms refers to an identical practice, the term *lde'u 'phrul* alone will be used in this paper's discussion of the divination and its auxiliary materials.
- 6 Broadly speaking, *lde'u 'phrul* may be understood as a form of cleromantic divination. That is to say, a form of divination that involves the casting of lots, dice, stones, bones, or other mobile elements in order to conduct a divinatory reading. As such, cleromantic practices often utilize an element of chance, which is interpreted as revealing the will and foreknowledge of supernatural forces. *lde'u 'phrul* is also a form of textually oriented cleromancy. Thus, following a casting, the diviner refers to a specific divination text in order to interpret the random patterns formed by the rite's mobile elements.
- 7 Beyond the appropriate texts, *lde'u 'phrul* also requires that one possess either forty-two white pebbles or forty-two beads from a crystal rosary. These objects should be spherical and roughly one centimetre in diameter. In the case of pebbles, a certain number of stones should be painted black. Typically, this number is given as either two of the pebbles or half of the pebbles. This 'painting black' is accomplished by drawing small pips upon the objects in question, which are referred to as "eyes" (*mig*).<sup>10</sup> In addition to the stones or crystals, one requires a white felt mat that should be square and roughly twelve to fifteen centimetres across. In the performance of a *lde'u 'phrul* casting, following the completion of the preliminary recitations, the pebbles are cast upon the mat and divided into nine piles using a simple process of division and subtraction.

Image 2. The sLob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma photographed following a *lde'u 'phrul* casting



Photography by Alexander K. Smith, July 2009  
Courtesy of sLob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma

- 8 With the exception of telephone requests, the *lde'u 'phrul* rites that I have observed proceed in the following fashion. To begin with, a client arrives and petitions the Slob dpon for an audience. The process governing this petition is no more complex than an exchange of formal greetings. Following this, the client is typically expected to produce a small monetary offering to the monastery. Irrespective of the amount, this gift is accepted. The Slob dpon then inquires into the nature of the client's query. This questioning can proceed for some time until both the specific nature of the client's question and the circumstances surrounding it are completely divulged. When this conversation reaches its conclusion, the casting is performed.
- 9 To begin a *lde'u 'phrul* casting, the Slob dpon first lays out the white mat between himself and his client. The pebbles are then placed in his hand. While holding the stones and reading from a divination text, the Slob dpon will recite a series of invocations that address a wide variety of divinities. As these invocations appear to follow a similar structure, perhaps two examples will suffice to demonstrate their general character.

The Buddhas of the perfected three bodies. The three jewels and the god of the three roots. The three inner, outer, and secret tutelary deities (*yi dam*).<sup>11</sup> The root lama and the guardian of the precepts... You three: *lha*, *klu*, and *gnod sbyin*.<sup>12</sup> The planets and the stars. The fierce *gzhi bdag* and *yul lha*.<sup>13</sup> Be present now at the *phy*a and the *mo*.<sup>14</sup> You are the lords of omniscience. There is nothing that you do not see or do not know. If any thought can be spared for me, please distinguish the good from the bad. Reveal in detail the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false. Conduct this divination clearly.<sup>1516</sup>

Lord who dwells inside the palace of the wind. Magical king of primordial knowledge (*ye mkhyen 'phrul rgyal*), by the invitation of the lords of the divination

gods, please come ! From the strata of luminous deities, you three: *lha*, *gar*, and *rten* please come ! Thug kar sgra bla, from your precious self-assembled fortress, please come ! The assembly of the three hundred and sixty divination gods, come quickly ! Please be seated upon the white divination mat (*lha gzhi dkar po*). I pay homage to you. I atone for my sins. I offer you gifts. Act as the divination gods who reveal divinations. Act as witnesses of both good and evil. Please bless these divination stones.<sup>17</sup>

- 10 In these two examples we see that a number of deities and natural forces are called upon by name to bear witness to the divination. Generally, the listing of these figures is given on a sliding scale, proceeding from enlightened or cosmic forces to highly localized divinities. Once this list is completed, the host of gods and demi-gods is requested to bear witness to the divination and, in some cases, to bless the divination stones (*mo rdel*). In this sense, the divinities are requested to act as guarantors of the divination's veracity. Importantly, the divinities do not fulfil this function through their proximity to the proceedings. On the contrary, the assembled divinities are considered to physically dissolve into the divination stones and, by doing so, transfer their own prophetic power to the stones. This process is illustrated in a short but beautiful passage, which provides a commentary to the text's invocations. The passage reads,

All of the gods who have been invoked like this, filling up the sky in front of you, descend from pure space. Having dissolved into light, they melt into the pebbles.<sup>18</sup>

- 11 In the performance of *lde'u 'phrul* rites, the dissolution of the deities into the divination stones is symbolized by a rapid succession of breaths that are blown upon the stones following the invocation. This act marks the conclusion of the invocation and the beginning of the casting. It is worth noting that the diffusion of the assembled deities into the divination stones indicates that the diviner does not divine using his own prophetic abilities. On the contrary, the *lde'u 'phrul* deities are considered to act directly through the stones themselves. This notion is maintained by the Slob dpon, who describes the process and its implications in the following fashion:

It is their [the deities'] power, not my power. A stone is a stone. A cloth is just a cloth. The most important thing is the deities. People ask me for divination all the time and normally I couldn't decide what to do. The people, you know, have doubts about what is the correct thing to do. They couldn't decide the truth for themselves. Instead they ask the lamas, but, a lama does not decide himself. The lama asks the deities to show him the correct results. They ask the divination deities to make it true, to make the correct divination... When a lama does divination with the *rdel mo*, the answers are in the stones and the gods make them true (Personal communication from the Slob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma: September 30, 2009).<sup>19</sup>

- 12 Following the completion of the requisite invocations, the Slob dpon casts the stones. The method governing the casting proceeds in the following fashion. To begin with, all the stones are placed at the top of the white felt mat and are arranged into a single pile. This pile is then randomly divided into three separate piles that are arranged in a horizontal line across the top of the mat. Stones are now subtracted from these piles exactly four at a time until there are one to four pebbles remaining in each pile. Once this is completed, the stones that had been subtracted are grouped together. These are then randomly divided in the same fashion as the initial pile, forming three piles that run horizontally across the center of the mat. The previous method of subtracting stones four at a time is performed once again. This leaves six piles numbering one to four pebbles each, which are arranged three across and two down. The stones that had been subtracted are again



grouped into a single pile and the process of division and subtraction is performed once more. The result leaves one with nine piles each of which contains one to four pebbles. These piles are arranged into a grid three across and three down. The remaining pebbles are then set aside. This method of casting is outlined succinctly in one of our texts:

There are forty-two pebbles by which to conduct a detailed examination. Cut these into three sections. Calculate as four the four. They are cast upon the nine *ling tse*.<sup>20</sup>

21

- 13 Once the casting is completed, one may refer to a *lde'u 'phrul* manual in order to interpret the numerological patterns formed by the nine piles of stones. Generally speaking, the number of stones in each pile and its location upon the divination mat are taken together as an indication of a particular symbol. As these symbols are integral to the interpretation of a casting, it is necessary to address the symbolic content inherent to each of the nine piles of stones, which I will refer to as the nine sections of the divination grid.

Image 3. The random distribution of pebbles following a *lde'u 'phrul* casting



Photography by Alexander K. Smith, July 2009  
Courtesy of sLob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma

- 14 *lde'u 'phrul* manuals contain a series of passages that ascribe distinguishing characteristics to each of the divination grid's nine sections. Most importantly, each vertical column of stones in the grid is given a title. Starting from the left side of the grid, the first vertical column is referred to as "the Gods' Place" (*lha sa*); the second column is called "the Family Place" (*khyim sa*); and the third column is referred to as "the Outside Place" (*phyi sa*). Each of these columns is then ascribed a specific set of values. The Gods' Place, for example, is understood to represent *the* masculine or masculine values. The Family Place represents *the* feminine and the hearth, while the Outside Place is taken to represent possible misfortune.

- 15 Beyond a division into three vertical columns, each of the divination grid's horizontal rows also bears a title. Simply put, beginning with the top row, these are referred to as the "first" (*dang po*), the "middle" (*bar ma* or '*bring po*'), and the "last" (*tha ma*). In this fashion, the upper left section of the grid is given the title "the First Gods' Place" (*lha sa dang po*), the bottom right section is "the Last Outside Place" (*phyi sa tha ma*), and so forth. Finally, the three vertical sections of the Family Place are given a second set of titles: the First Family Place is "the Sky Door" (*gnam sgo*); the Middle Family Place is "the Heart of the Divination" (*mo snying*); and the Last Family Place is "the Earth Door" (*sa sgo*).<sup>22</sup> These signifiers are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of titles within the divination grid

<b>lHa sa</b>	<b>Khyim sa</b>	<b>Phyi sa</b>
<b>dang po</b>	<b>gnam sgo</b>	
<b>bar ma</b>	<b>snying sgo / mo snying</b>	
<b>tha ma</b>	<b>sa sgo</b>	

- 16 With the above information and the use of a *lde'u 'phrul* manual, it is quite easy to begin an interpretation of the patterns formed by the divination stones. For instance, should one find that there is one stone in the First Gods' Place, it is a simple matter of locating the corresponding section in the divination text. In this case, one finds:
- If one stone is cast here, one will have the protection of the sound souls (*sgra bla*) and the *wer ma*.<sup>23</sup> If offerings are given to the *wer ma* and the tutelary gods (*lha srung*), the outlook will be positive.<sup>24</sup>
- 17 Taking this as an example, we see that the general structure of a positive casting indicates a fortuitous outcome and then provides a list of deities that should be propitiated or a set of rituals that should be performed in order to guarantee good fortune in the future. In the case of negative castings, however, the texts tend to provide much more elaborate responses. For example, should there be two stones in the Last Gods' Place, the passage reads:
- If a two is cast here, it is bad for one's life (*srog*) *phywa* and good for the *phywa* of enemies.<sup>25</sup> The *chung sri*<sup>26</sup> will rage against children. It is a sign that the peg tying down one's horses and livestock will come loose. There is a great likelihood of



encountering enemies and thieves. Perform a *dgra bla brub*. If there is an illness, the child-killing demon will be nearby. Furthermore, a red complexioned woman from the northeast will carry black utensils (*spyad nag*).<sup>27</sup> Repair a damaged road and recite a dhāraṇī for longevity (*tshe gzungs*)... This is particularly bad for those born in the Ox year.<sup>28</sup>

- 18 In this sense, negative castings tend to begin with a series of misfortunes and malignant forces that loom in one's immediate future. These are proceeded by a list of specific ritual activities that one may perform in order to ward off future tribulations.
- 19 In interpreting a *lde'u 'phrul* casting, the Slob dpon must gauge the relationship of negative to positive results and contrast these with their relative location within the divination grid. Drawing from the above examples we can see how each individual section of the grid may be understood. However, we have not yet addressed the method through which the dissonant sections of the grid are transformed into a cohesive and ordered narrative. In order to do this, the paper will now turn to a discussion of divinatory symbolism. In particular, it will focus upon a configuration of symbols expounded upon at length in *lde'u 'phrul* texts, yet, visually inconspicuous during the rite's performance.

## *lde'u 'phrul* symbolism and methods of interpretation

- 20 As we have seen, *lde'u 'phrul* texts organize the nine sections of the divination grid into three vertical columns and three horizontal rows. These form a matrix of nine spaces that are represented by the nine piles of stones. We have also seen that each of these spaces possesses at least one distinguishing title. It was not previously shown, however, that *lde'u 'phrul* texts ascribe a further set of six symbols to each of the grid's nine sections. In short, these symbols are: (1) a deity, (2) a direction, (3) a number, (4) a color, (5) an astrological trigram (*spar kha*), and (6) an element. For example, in the case of the Middle Gods' Place, one finds the following entry:

As for the master of the Middle Gods' Place, he is called g.Ya' spang skyes gcig. He is dPa' chen wer ma nyi nya.<sup>29</sup> He has a lion's head and a lynx's ears. He has feet that are blades and wings that are small razors (*cho gri*). His feet are vortexes of wind. On his head he wears the great helmet of the sun. On his body, he wears the great armour of the stars. He rides upon the savage tiger of courage in the prime of its life. He resides in the fortress of Khro chu dmu lugs upon the peak of dMu ri de'u dkar. He is commander of all the sound souls (*sgra bla*). He is surrounded by the myriad armies of the *wer ma*. They delight in *ku* and revel in *bswo*.<sup>30</sup> He is the sound soul (*sgra bla*) of young men in the prime of their lives... The eastern direction, the number three, deep blue, *tsin*,<sup>31</sup> and the wood element.<sup>32</sup>

- 21 In this example, the Middle Gods' Place is first described as a martial deity. Following the listing of the deity's attributes, the text ascribes five symbols to the Middle Gods' Place: a direction (east), a number (three), a color (deep blue), a trigram (*tsin*) and an element (wood). Narrated in this fashion, variations of these symbols appear in each section of the divination grid. Rather than belabor the reader with a dense compilation of names and terms, a complete list of these variables and their relative location within the divination grid is presented in Figure 2. Seen in this fashion, it is quite clear that the grid is not composed of an entirely random configuration of symbols. On the contrary, it appears that *lde'u 'phrul* texts outline a specific symbolic configuration that is encoded within the secret symbolism of the divination stones.

Figure 2. Illustration of deities, symbols, and characteristics associated with the divination grid

IHa sa	Khyim sa	Phyi sa
rGra bla bya khyung pa patrilineal ancestry; the generation of wealth - wind - southeast - four - green	lCam mo g.yung drung mon matrilineal ancestry; healing abilities - fire - south - nine - red	Srin po skya ring khrag mig suffering; <i>bdud</i> , <i>srin</i> , <i>rgyal</i> , and <i>gdon</i> ; enemies - earth - southwest - two - black
dPa' chen wer ma nyi nya martial prowess; men in their physical prime - wood - east - three - blue	g.Ya' 'brum sil ma child rearing; the hearth; the medical profession; women of all ages - centre - five - yellow	Srin po phag zhon problems amongst relatives and friends; legal disputes; the property of enemies - iron - west - seven - red
mNgon shes phyas bu g.yang dkar male children - mountain - northeast - eight - white	Gangs sman g.yu bun kang chung servants; female children; the <i>phyas</i> of livestock - water - north - one - white	Srin gyi khyi mo ma gsang darkness; pestilence; thieves and beggars; gossip - sky - northwest - six - white

- 22 Having presented Figure 2, several aspects of the divination grid are of particular importance. To begin with, it may be noted that Figure 2 bears a certain resemblance to an elementary maṇḍala. The division of the area into nine spaces, the presence of deities in each of these spaces, and the inversion of cardinal and inter-cardinal directions are all, for instance, features common to maṇḍalas found within the Tibetan cultural sphere (Snodgrass 1992, Tucci 1961, Macdonald 1997, Beer 1999, Huber *et al.* 1999). In addition to this material microcosm, the divination grid contains a number of elements representative of the human condition. The Gods' Place and the Family Place are taken, for example, to represent the three stages of the human life-cycle: youth, maturity, and old age. Concurrently, the Outside Place is composed of the evils that may afflict an individual during these three stages of life. Taking these factors into consideration, it appears that *lde'u 'phrul* texts dictate *inter alia* the construction of a material representation of the cosmos and of the individual's life-cycle within it.
- 23 Beyond the symbolic configuration of a microcosm, the attribution of a color, a number, and an element to each of the diagram's nine sections is also of interest. As illustrated in Figure 3, the distribution of these elements in the divination grid is virtually identical to the arrangement of a particular numerological device encountered in Tibetan astrology: the '*sme ba* square' (Norbu 1997, pp. 152-156; Cornu 2002, pp. 102-125; Beer 1999, pp. 121-122). Though this is not the place to venture into a cumbersome discussion of Tibetan astrology, perhaps a few brief remarks concerning the *sme ba* and their relationship to the trigrams (*spar kha*) will serve to clarify the symbolic content of the divination grid.

Figure 3. Comparative illustration of the *lde'u 'phrul* divination grid and the astrological symbolism of the *sme ba* and *spar kha*

<i>lde'u 'phrul</i> divination grid			the <i>sme ba</i> and the <i>spar kha</i>		
green	red	black	green	red	black
4	9	2	4	9	2
wind	fire	earth	wind	fire	earth
blue	yellow	red	blue	yellow	red
3	5	7	3	5	7
wood	--	iron	wood	--	iron
white	white	white	white	white	white
8	1	6	8	1	6
mountain	water	sky	mountain	water	sky

- 24 A *sme ba* square is formed by placing the numbers one to nine along with their correlate colors into a three-by-three grid in which each column (horizontal, vertical, and diagonal) can be added together to produce the sum of fifteen. Numerologically speaking, this grouping possesses a great deal of symmetry: the base of three multiplied by the central five equals fifteen; the number five serves as a midpoint between both one and nine and three and seven; and the central five may be multiplied by the number nine to produce forty-five, which is identical to the sum total of the digits of the *sme ba* square (Beer 1999, pp. 121-122). Furthermore, taken together with the eight trigrams (*spar kha*), which may be added to the square's cardinal and inter-cardinal points, the *sme ba* form the basis of a number of different methods of astrological calculation, the most common of which is perhaps the one hundred and eighty year cycle (*sme 'khor*) and its division into three sixty year groups (*sme phreng*) (Norbu 1997, Cornu 2002).
- 25 With the above configurations in mind, it is now possible to make several remarks concerning the overarching structure of *lde'u 'phrul* symbolism. This article has shown how, following the performance of a *lde'u 'phrul* casting, each pile of stones is understood to possess a particular meaning determined by its number and relative location. In addition to the constellation of meaning present in the divination stones, an analysis of *lde'u 'phrul* texts also demonstrates that the divination's performance involves the creation of a microcosm that encompasses both social and cosmic dimensions. The symbolic representation of this microcosm was then shown to overlap with the *sme ba* and *spar kha*, which are combined in the formation of an astrological diagram capable of representing the past, the present, and the future. The simultaneity of these symbolic configurations demonstrates, to say the least, the complexity of the rite's analytical aspects.<sup>33</sup> It also emphasizes the particular expertise of the diviner in his capacity as a *bricoleur*, brining an ordered and sequential meaning to the simultaneity of the divination's overdetermined symbolic content.
- 26 The similarity of divinatory diagnosis to *bricolage* has been well noted (Parkin 1991). As a *bricoleur*, the practitioner of divination expresses analytical creativity by fashioning a recognizable narrative out of the "debris and chaos" of mixed metaphors, homologies, and culturally specific images (Parkin 1991, p. 183). In its similarity to myth-making, the work of the ritual *bricoleur* has been compared to that of an artist, creating new works

from a sphere of pre-existent imagery and narrative content (Lévi-Strauss 1966). With regard to the interpretation of *lde'u 'phrul*, it is now clear that the diviner possesses a vast reservoir of culturally specific symbolism from which to craft the divination's product: a response to the client's query.

- 27 In its similarity to *bricolage*, the technique of divinatory interpretation is as much an art as a science. As such, a full exegesis of the diviner's analytical methods is well beyond the scope of the present paper. Nonetheless, this article has attempted to cast light upon *lde'u 'phrul* divination's content and creative potential. In addition to conducting a study of the divination's performative dimensions, it has been argued that *lde'u 'phrul* texts outline a number of symbolic configurations that provide a temporal, social, and cosmic framework within which to correlate the results of each casting. While such devices are by no means unique to the performance of *lde'u 'phrul*,<sup>34</sup> their presence demonstrates the richness of divinatory symbolism within the Bon milieu. It is sincerely hoped that such divinatory practices will come to be exposed to academic scrutiny not only into their social dimensions, but also as carriers of culture that preserve the often unarticulated discourse of mythology and symbolism.

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MSI

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MSA

rJe 'brug chen po Khro tshang 'brug lha. *Ma sangs 'phrul gyi rdel mo mngon shes rno gsal gyi sgron me zhe bya ba bzhugs pa legs po*.



## NOTES

1. It is important to note that Chögyal Namkhai Norbu presents a cursory discussion of *lde'u 'phrul* in two of his publications (1997, pp. 25-30; 2009, pp. 192-194). While these works are important contributions to the study of Tibetan culture, they clearly embody an emic presentation of the Bon po ritual milieu.

2. The Bon po settlement of Dolanji is known by a number of different names. In short, the Tibetan name for the settlement is "the New *Thob rgyal*" (*Thob rgyal gsar pa*), which refers to the Thob rgyal valley near the historical sMan ri monastery in Tibet (Cech 1987, 1993). According to Cech, "this name was adopted in the hope that the settlement would become the supporting estate of the new sMan ri monastery" (1987, p. 154). The site is also known in Tibetan as "the Solan Settlement" (*Solan gzhis chags*). However, a number of villagers use a more sectarian idiom in calling the site "the Bon po Settlement" (*Bon po gzhis chags*). The English name for the settlement is the Tibetan Bon po Foundation, which is the village's official administrative title. Despite these various appellations, the most pervasive name for the settlement is clearly Dolanji, the original Indian name for the area (Cech 1987, pp. 154-155).

3. In surveying both Dolanji and sMan ri, I have been able to draw from a thorough census of the region that was undertaken by Dr. Krystyna Cech between 1985 and 1987 (Cech 1987, 1993). Despite the time that has elapsed since the publication of Cech's research, with regard to the demographics of the local population, her study is still tremendously accurate. However, this research was conducted immediately prior to the establishment of a large orphanage in the village, which is referred to as the Bon Children's Welfare Center (B.C.W.C.). While conducting my most recent research in Autumn of 2009, the B.C.W.C. supported nearly three-hundred children and a large number of staff in local dormitories.

4. I am grateful to the Slob dpon 'Phrin las nyi ma for both his erudition and for his graciousness in allowing me to repeatedly observe divination sessions during the summer and autumn of 2009. I would also like to thank Professor Charles Ramble for helping me through the difficulties of translation and Dr. Katia Buffetrille for offering me a forum in which to present my work.

5. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (1997) argues that the term *lde'u 'phrul* is sometimes rendered as *rdel drug* because of an alleged phonetic similarity. He writes, "we can... assume that with the passing of time the pronunciation involuntarily changed and simplified, and [*rdel drug*] being easy to pronounce and simple to understand, those people who did not know the meaning of the word altered the original spelling, giving rise to the perpetuation of the mistake" (1997, pp. 26-27). Upon reflection, the phonetic dissimilarity of these two terms seems to indicate that Norbu's argument is a simplification. It is tempting to hypothesize that these two terms may represent the homogenization of previously dissonant pebble divination practices. However, the matter clearly requires further study.

6. In my research, I have found that the term "six stones" (*rdel drug*) appears in a very singular context within *lde'u 'phrul* textual sources. In the analytical sections of the texts at hand, the term is used as a preface to the discussion of certain configurations of stones. For instance, one finds the following passage:

"(1.3.2) six stones like this is highest. For whatever *mo* is cast, this is excellent".

(132) 'di 'dra'i rdel drug rab yin pa'i / ci tab ci yi mo la bzang (MSI, XV).

This passage depicts the horizontal arrangement of three piles of stones numbering one, three, and two as possessing an analytical value that supercedes the symbolic content of each individual pile. In this sense, the term "six stones" is clearly used in the performance of *lde'u 'phrul*. Apparently, however, it serves only to characterize the arrangement of particular piles of stones within the divination grid at large.

7. It is important to note that the orthography of divination manuals is notoriously inconsistent. As such, *Ma sang rdel mo* is often rendered *Ma sangs rdel mo*.

8. The mythological region of Ma sang is often considered to be a location visited by either sTon pa gShen rab or Confucius (*Kong tse 'phrul gyi rgyal po*). During this visit, the figure in question is said to have conducted divinatory teachings on the subject of pebble divination. For example, the following passage presents a Bon po ontology of the dissemination of divinatory traditions.

"In the land of Zhang Zhung he systematized rope divination (*ju thig*). In the land of China he systematized hydromancy (*chu zhags*). In the land of Ma sang he systematized pebble divination (*rdel mo*). And in the land of Ye nyag he systematized scapulomancy (*sog mo*)".

*zhang zhung yul du ju thig gtan la phab / rgya yi yul du cho zhags ba gtan la phab / ma sang gi yul du rdel mo gtan la phab / ye nyag ki yul du sog mo gtan la phab* / (MSA, V).

9. Generally speaking, the Ma sang are considered to be a class of *the'u rang* deities, which belong to the broader category of the *gNyan* (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, p. 625; Snellgrove 1967, p. 224). According to traditional narratives, the Ma sang are considered to have ruled Tibet during the pre-historical period (Norbu 1997, p. 229 n.63).

10. The presence here of both white and black objects is generally considered to be a necessity for the balancing of negativity and fortune in the divination (Personal communication from the Slob dpon). Also, with regard to the prevalence of dualistic imagery in the Bon tradition, see Karmay 1998, pp. 131-132.

11. As some of this article's readership may be from a non-Tibetanist background, English translations are generally offered of the gods and demi-gods depicted in the divination texts. It is understood that literal translations of these terms are often simplistic and unsatisfactory. Where possible, additional references for specific terms will be supplied.

12. The *gnod sbyin* are equivalent to the Sanskrit *yakṣa* (Norbu 1997, p. 248; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, p. 620).

13. The *yul lha* and *gzhi bdag* are two classes of highly localized and ancient territorial deities popular in both Bon and Buddhist traditions (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, p. 387).

14. Here, *mo* translates simply as "the divination". In many contexts, *phya* denotes "luck, fortune, or the propensity towards fortune". In this passage, however, it seems to carry the same connotation as one sees in PT 1285 (Lalou 1957, pp. 42, 66, 86, 137) and PT 1047 (Macdonald and Imaeda 1979, pp. 331-349), where the term has been rendered as "prognosis" (Karmay 1998, p. 247). As such, the passage seems to indicate a desire that the deities be present at the "divination" (*mo*) and the ancillary provision of "prognoses" (*phya*).

15. It is important to note that this paper presents Tibetan sources in their original, unedited form. In the case of unclear or damaged sections, either a provisional transliteration or the number of missing syllables has been provided in closed brackets.

16. *sku gsum rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas dang / kon mchog gsum dang rtsa gsum lha / yid dam phyi nang gsal gsum dang / tsa rgyud bla ma bka' skyong dang / dpal mgon 'gur lha brten ma dang / lha klu gnod sbyin ga zla skar dang / yul lha gzhi bdag drag rtsal can / de ring mo dang phyi la dbar / khyed ni thams mkhyen pa'i bdag / mi shes mi mthong gang yang med / bdag la dgongs pa'i dus byung na / bzang ngag gnyis kyis gshan byed la / bden rdzun legs nyes so sor ston / rno mthong mo 'di gsal bar mdzod* / (MSI, pp. ii-iii).

17. *rlung mkhar gyi nang na bzhugs pa'i rje / mo lha'i rgyal po spyen 'dren gyis / ye mkhyen 'phrul rgyal gshegs su sol / 'od gsal lha yi phreng nas / lha gar rten gsum gshegs su sol / rang bdus rin chen sku mkhar nas / thug kar sgra bla gshegs su sol / mo lha gsum bgya drug cu'i tshogs / ma thog smyur bar gshegs su sol / lha gzhi dkar po'i gong 'dir bzhugs / phyag lo sdig bshags [bdran] yon 'bul / rno mthong ston pa'i mo lha mdzod / bzang ngan ma nor gsal bar mdzod / legs nyes gnyis kyi dpang po mdzod / mo rdel 'di la byin gyis rlobs* / (MSA, p. iv).

18. *de ltar bdar ba'i lha tshogs thams cad mdun gi nam mkha' gang ba tsam dbyings nas byon te / 'od du zhu nas rde'u la thim pas* / (MSA, pp. xii-xiii).

19. It is important to note that the diffusion of power into the divination stones can be considered to place the burden of truth upon the deities in question. This provides *lde'u 'phrul* with a natural non-falsifiability by directing any doubts concerning the practice's veracity to secondary causes, such as the power of the deities and the correct performance of the invocations, rather than to the divination itself.

20. *Ling tse* is generally rendered as "lattice". In this context, however, the term refers to the nine individual sections of the divination grid.

21. *de nas so sor dpyad pas rde'u bzhi bcu rtso gnyis yod / tsho gsum gcad la / bzhi bzhir bgrangs / ling rtse dgu ru bab pa yin* / (MSI, p. iii).

22. With regard to the ritual significance of "Sky Door" (*gnam sgo*) and "Earth Door" (*sa sgo*), see Dollfus 1994.

23. The *wer ma* are a common class of warrior gods (Karmay 1997, p. 257; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, p. 629).

24. *'di ru rdel gcig bab pa na / sgra bla wer ma'i mgon skyabs byed / lha srung sgra bla mchod na bzang* / (MSI, p. iv).

25. With regard to the terms *phywa* and *phya*, see Karmay 1998, p. 247 n. 9.

26. *Chung sri*: a type of demon that is considered to prey on children (Norbu 1997, p. 46).

27. According to Norbu (1997, p. 260 n. 21), it was customarily considered inauspicious for a bride to join her future husband while carrying "black utensils" (*spyad nag*). The presence of such objects was considered to be an evil omen.

28. *gnyis bab srog phywa dgra phywar ngan / bu tsha dag la chung sri sdang / rta nor rtod phur 'bud pa'i ngo / dgra rkun ngo che dgra bla brub bya / nad pa rang phyogs sri bu gdon / yang na byang shar 'tshams phyogs nas / mo rigs sha dmar spyad nag / lam 'phrang bcos shing tshe gzungs 'don / ... khyed par glang lo pa la ngan* / (MSI, vii).

29. *dPa' chen wer ma nyi nya* is considered to be a warrior god belonging to the *Ye* category of deities (Karmay 1997, pp. 256-258)

30. *Ku* and *bswo* are common onomatopoeic terms representing war-cries.

31. In this passage the syllable indicating the relevant trigram is damaged and somewhat difficult to read. Based upon its location within the divination grid, however, the syllable is almost certainly *tsin*, which is aligned with the wood element and the eastern direction (Cornu 2002, p. 112).

32. *lha sa 'bring po'i bdag po ni / g.ya' spang rkyes gcig zer ba de / dpa'i chen wer ma nyi nya yin / seng ge'i mgo la dbyi yi rna / ral gri'i rkang la chu gri'i gshog / rkang pa rlung gi 'khor lo can / nyi ma'i rmog chen dbu la gsol / skar ma'i grab chen [?] la mnab / dpa' bo stag rgod dar ma bcibs / dmu ri de'u dkar rtse mo yi / gro chu dmu lugs mkhar la bzhugs / sgra bla yongs kyi dmag dpon yin / wer ma'i [?] dmag 'bum gyis bskor / ku la dga' zhing bswo la dgyes / skyes bu dar ma'i sgra bla yin / ... shar phyogs sum mthing [zhen] shing khams* / (MSA, pp. xvii-xviii).

33. With respect to the discussion of analytical approaches regarding the study of divination, see Devish 1985 and Peek *et al.* 1991.

34. It is important to note that such schemata are not particular to *lde'u 'phrul* nor to divinations conducted within the Bon po milieu. On the contrary, a number of scholars have argued that divination systems often contain material representations of the cosmos and of the place of social institutions within it (Turner 1975, Peet *et al.* 1991, Parkin 1982).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article will discuss the performance of *lde'u 'phrul*, a variant of Himalayan pebble divination, as it is practiced in the Bon community surrounding sMan ri monastery near Solan, Sirmour District (H.P.), India. Drawing from several divination texts and fieldwork conducted at sMan ri monastery, this article will discuss the methods of casting and the symbolism evoked in supplying the divination's clients with prognostications.

Cet article s'intéresse à l'art de la divination *lde'u 'phrul*, un type de divination réalisée au moyen de petits cailloux de l'Himalaya, tel qu'il est pratiqué dans la communauté Bon vivant aux environs du monastère de sMan ri, à proximité de la ville de Solan, dans la région du Sirmour (H.P.) en Inde. Cet article fondé sur des textes portant sur l'art de la divination ainsi que sur une enquête de terrain effectuée durant plusieurs mois à sMan ri, s'intéresse aux pratiques de la divination *lde'u 'phrul* et à leur symbolisme.

## INDEX

**Geographical index:** Inde, Dolanji

**Mots-clés:** divination, astrologie, symbolisme, rituel, maṇḍala

**Keywords:** divination, astrology, symbolism, ritual, maṇḍala

**Population** Tibétains, Indiens, Bon po

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